

Looking critically at social studies text material in diverse classrooms

What this research was about and why it is important

Teachers need to make decisions about how to choose and use text material to promote content-area learning. This is particularly important in classrooms with migrant language learners, since these learners have a diverse set of experiences upon which to build new knowledge. Previous research has shown that social studies text material often conveys mainstream perspectives, such as a Western-centric view of a divided world. This study contributed new knowledge by employing theory of visual design and highlighting the use of text material in classroom practice. The study focused on how a teacher led discussions around a civics textbook in a linguistically diverse grade 6. It showed how the information structure of the textbook promoted a problematic, Western-centric view of the world. However, the study also showed the potential in using knowledge of information structures to promote both teachers' and students' critical awareness of social studies texts.

What the researchers did

- The study was conducted in a Swedish Grade 6 classroom (age 12-13). Data was collected through field notes and audio recordings (16 hours).
- A social studies teacher and two groups of students participated. Half of the students had migrant backgrounds.
- The theory of visual design was used to analyse the teacher's use of a civics textbook. The teacher had a particular focus on the discussion of different text elements, such as headings and images on the textbook spreads, with the students.

What the researchers found

- The textbook used a given-new information structure by introducing something known or relatable followed by something presumed to be unknown. For example, a comfortable life in Sweden was contrasted with people struggling in other parts of the world.
- Thus, the information structure promoted a Western-centric perspective and was not attuned to the different lives and experiences of students in a classroom with many migrant language learners.
- In discussions about the texts, the mainstream perspective was often reinforced. However, by bringing the students' attention to how images and headings on different parts of the textbook spread conveyed contrasting information, the teacher-led discussion also indicated the potential for a critical understanding of the texts.

Things to consider

- Teachers need to be aware of textbook material which marginalizes non-mainstream students, for example by presuming that students have no knowledge of migration or life in other parts of the world.
- Knowledge of typical information values in textbook material can be a resource to critically interrogate what is presented as being taken for granted. Examples from the study include how the students were expected to relate to Swedish national customs and typical middle-class practices of browsing travel brochures in anticipation of going abroad on vacation.
- In textbook material, what contrasting messages are conveyed on the left side (given) and right side (new)?
- Which expectations regarding the students' previous knowledge and experiences does this information structure reveal?
- To critically reflect on the information provided in textbook material and contrast it with previous knowledge, life experiences and other text is a desirable educational practice for both first language and migrant language learners.

Material, data, open access article: [open access article](#)

How to cite this summary: Walldén, R. (2022). Looking critically at social studies text material used in diverse classrooms. *OASIS Summary of Walldén (2021) in Journal of Language, Identity & Education*. <https://oasis-database.org>

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